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DELIGHTFUL PLACES

A Book Tour of English Country Houses and Gardens



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A Book Tour of English Country Houses and Gardens

*Compiled by
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Stratfield Saye, Hampshire: Those desirous of seeing the Interior of the House, are requested to ring at the door of entrance and to express their desire. It is wished that the practice of stopping on the paved walk to look in at the windows should be discontinued.

[Noticeboard worded by the 1st Duke of Wellington and placed at the front door, c. 1825-40]¹

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English country homes have attracted travelers for centuries, as few have been able to resist the appeal of these treasure-filled mansions and edenic gardens. Many visitors, invited or not, have sought the unrivaled hospitality of the owners, while others have been content merely to revel in the beauty of their spacious places. Still others have gone to peer and poke, to cavil and compare, and otherwise indulge their curiosity.

Celia Fiennes, a seventeenth-century diarist and inveterate traveler, was one of them: Between 1685 and 1712 she rode all over England, leaving us sprightly accounts of her travels. Particularly interested in the many estates dotting the landscape, she took careful note of the placement of the houses, the furnishings, and the design of the gardens. Little escaped her attention. She thought, for example, that Burghley's hillside site was a good choice and quite lovely. Hinchingbrooke's furniture, tapestries, and Irish oak ceilings were rather fine, but the "picture of Venus" was "too much uncloth'd."² Wilton's French-style garden with its neat walks and fanciful waterworks lived up to her standards, but Haddon Hall with walls built in the twelfth century she considered outmoded.

Mrs. Philip Lybbe Powys, a little known society lady traveling in the eighteenth century, was equally delighted with what she saw but was sometimes critical of the many and varied houses she entered. Stopping at Wilton, home of the Earl of Pembroke, she declared: "Merely to see, 'tis certainly one of the finest sights in England; but to reside at, 'tis too grand, too gloomy, and what I style most magnificently uncomfortable, the situation badd (sic), the rooms, except one, too small, and I want three or four considerable ones."³ Wilton, rebuilt in 1647 after a fire, was probably not modern enough in 1776 for Mrs. Powys' advanced taste, but Celia Fiennes liked the house as much as she approved of the garden.

Elizabeth Bennett, heroine of Jane Austen's nineteenth-century novel *Pride and Prejudice*, unwillingly visited Pemberley, the rural seat of Mr. Darcy, a gentleman she held in disdain. The sight of the imposing house and beautiful garden, however, helped to soften her heart toward that would-be suitor. "It was a large, handsome stone building, standing well on rising ground, and abacked by a ridge of high woody hills . . . Elizabeth was delighted . . . and at that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!"⁴

¹ James Lees-Milne, ed., *The Country House* (New York, 1982), p. 102.

² Christopher Morris, ed., *The Illustrated Journeys of Celia Fiennes* (London, 1982), p. 82.

³ Caroline Girle Powys, *Passages from the Diaries of Mrs. Philip Lybbe Powys of Hardwick House, Oxon* (London 1899), p. 165.

⁴ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Boston, 1956), p. 181.

To this day England's stately homes attract visitors by the thousands, inspiring both literary comment and photographic documentation. Whether or not one plans to "ring at the door of entrance," the resulting literature delights the eye and imagination just as it informs us of changing tastes and social conditions.

Peace and prosperity were established in England by Henry VII (reigned 1485–1509). Enjoying the stability of Tudor rule, sixteenth-century magnates began either to modernize their castles or to build new dwellings in which comfort was more important than defense. Initially they had continued to build along medieval lines, but in response to continental trends they adopted the new Renaissance styles later in the century. Compton Wynyates, for example, which was completed in 1528, had all the features of a medieval house: a moat, towers, and a great hall with screen. Although it had a great hall, Longleat, completed for Sir John Thynne in 1580, had many features which were introduced in the sixteenth century: It was symmetrical in design, had a flat rather than gabled roof, and showed a great expanse of windows.

The gardens framing these new mansions were fairly large plots enclosed by walls. Herbs, vegetables, flowers, and fruit trees were planted throughout, but the most important feature was the celebrated knot, an elaborate patterned bed formed of hedges, flowers, and other small plants. Mounds were also a feature of the garden. Crowned with an arbor these grassy knolls provided views of the knots and the countryside. Mazes and topiary were incorporated to amuse and enchant the garden's visitors. As the century progressed both gardens and houses became increasingly elaborate.

Very large and grandly decorated Hatfield, completed for Sir Robert Cecil in 1612, is an example of the great houses built at the beginning of the seventeenth century. However, the real harbinger of that century's architecture was the classical style of Inigo Jones (1573–1652) and Christopher Wren (1632–1723). Although Jones' work was disrupted by the Civil War, later architects were influenced by his Queen's House (1616) at Greenwich and his Banqueting House (1619) in London. The simple exteriors, compactness, and symmetry of the two buildings provided a marked contrast to the houses built in the style of Hatfield. Wren built few country houses, but his use of the classical form was widely influential.

Both French and Dutch styles of gardening were prevalent in seventeenth-century England. Gardens formed by the formality and symmetry of Versailles extended from the house in orderly majesty. Between the long tree-lined avenues, bisected by shorter avenues, these gardens featured large beds similar to the knots, statuary, pavilions, mazes, fountains, and other waterworks. Later the Dutch influence led to more sophisticated topiary and greater use of water, particularly in canals. Because new plants and trees from overseas were constantly being introduced, seventeenth-century gardens exhibited a botanical variety previously unimagined.

To display their power and wealth and to provide showcases for

family art treasures, the eighteenth-century upper classes built great baroque palaces. Grandiose and theatrical, these houses were intended to glorify their owners. Massive Castle Howard and monumental Blenheim Palace, completed by Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661-1736) and John Vanbrugh (1664-1726) in 1712 and 1722, respectively, are prime examples. Composed of a huge central block, a great courtyard, and extensive side wings, each house is an awesome sight. Visiting in the 1750's, Mrs. Philip Lybbe Powys took note of the grandeur, finding Castle Howard of "vast extent" and Blenheim Palace a "magnificent pile." There could be no doubt that these country house owners were powers in the land.

In the 1730's the baroque style gave way to Palladianism, a movement based on the work of the sixteenth-century Italian architect Andrea Palladio that stressed restraint and conformity to the architectural rules of the classical past. Lord Burlington not only built his house at Chiswick in the Palladian manner, but also promoted the Palladian style in country houses through his support of local architects. Inspired by his study of Roman antiquities, the Italian Renaissance, and contemporary French and English design, Robert Adam (1728-1792) reinterpreted Palladianism. By combining classical elements in fresh ways, both in exterior detailing and meticulous interior decoration, he achieved a new lightness and sophistication. Osterley Park, with its Ionic portico, friezes, Etruscan motifs, and neo-classical furniture exemplifies Adam's elegant style.

Rejecting the artificiality of geometric gardens, William Kent (1684-1748), Lancelot "Capability" Brown (1716-1783), and Humphry Repton (1752-1818) created gardens of undulating line, which they considered the line of nature. Characteristic of eighteenth-century landscape gardens were expanses of lawn, large groves of trees, streams, and irregularly shaped lakes. Classical statues, temples, bridges, Gothic ruins, Chinese pagodas, or other bric-a-brac evocative of a remote and romantic past were included in many of these gardens. With its classical temples, lakes, and winding paths Stourhead survives as an example of the idealized landscape garden.

Country houses in the nineteenth century were built in a wide range of styles. The elegant neo-classical house of the late eighteenth century gave way to revivals of Tudor, Elizabethan, and other styles from the past. Thoresby Hall, built for Earl Manvers, is a Victorian version of an Elizabethan house. Ferdinand de Rothschild built Waddesdon manor, his great house in Buckinghamshire, in the form of a French Renaissance palace. Sir Charles Barry, in the late 1850's led a revival of the Gothic, though he built in other styles, too. In renovating eighteenth-century Harewood House he gave its south front the look of an Italian Renaissance palazzo. With money plentiful and architects imaginative the nineteenth-century builder could indulge any of his fancies.

The landscaped parks of the eighteenth century no longer appealed to owners of the great houses, who inclined to the formal gardens of a more distant past. Charles Barry, for example, tore up part of

“Capability” Brown’s lawn at Harewood House and replaced it with an Italian terrace garden. However, the increased availability of exotic plants from throughout the British empire and a renewed interest in natural history inspired others to develop gardens which were above all else display areas for their plants. Late in the century a new ideal of the garden emerged in the work of Gertrude Jekyll (1843–1932) and the architect Edwin Lutyens in which the apparent free form of the plantings was shaped by a strong architectural substructure.

The titles chosen for this book tour are only a few of the many books on the subject in the Library of Congress collection. These were chosen to give an overview of the country house and the life which grew up around it, and to offer an idea of the development of the garden in England. In the section on houses the general works are listed first, while the books about specific houses are grouped by historical period. Although many of the houses have undergone major changes in later centuries, the books about them are generally listed in the period in which the house was built. Listed in the garden section are general works as well as books about period gardens, noted gardeners, and sample specialist gardens.

Some of the general titles are likely to be found in most libraries. Reference librarians can advise about their availability. If the books sought are not in local libraries a search of the *Subject Guide to Books in Print* (a standard reference book found in libraries) will reveal which of the books are in print. Appropriate *Subject Guide to Books in Print* headings are: ARCHITECTURE, DOMESTIC—GREAT BRITAIN, ENGLAND—HISTORIC HOUSES, GARDENS—GREAT BRITAIN, GREAT BRITAIN—HISTORIC HOUSES, and LANDSCAPE GARDENING—GREAT BRITAIN. Local bookstores will then be able to order any of the titles found.

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TX985 .B44

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The English historic houses handbook / Neil Burton. — 1st ed. — New York : Facts on File, 1981. — xxix, 639 p. : ill.

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Cook, Olive.

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DA655 .C58

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DA533 .C777 1980

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(Entries are arranged alphabetically by name of house)

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DA690.F68 R6

Col. maps on lining papers.

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NA5471.W553 N37

Lumley Castle : the historic Durham home of the earls of Scarborough, now occupied by University College, Durham ; official guide. — [Derby : Produced by English Life Publications, 1953]. — [16] p. : ill.

DA690.L856 L8

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DA664.S29 L82

Tudor Homes, 1500-1600

Dean, Eveline Barbara.

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DA664.H417 H37 1972

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DA664.K38 D8

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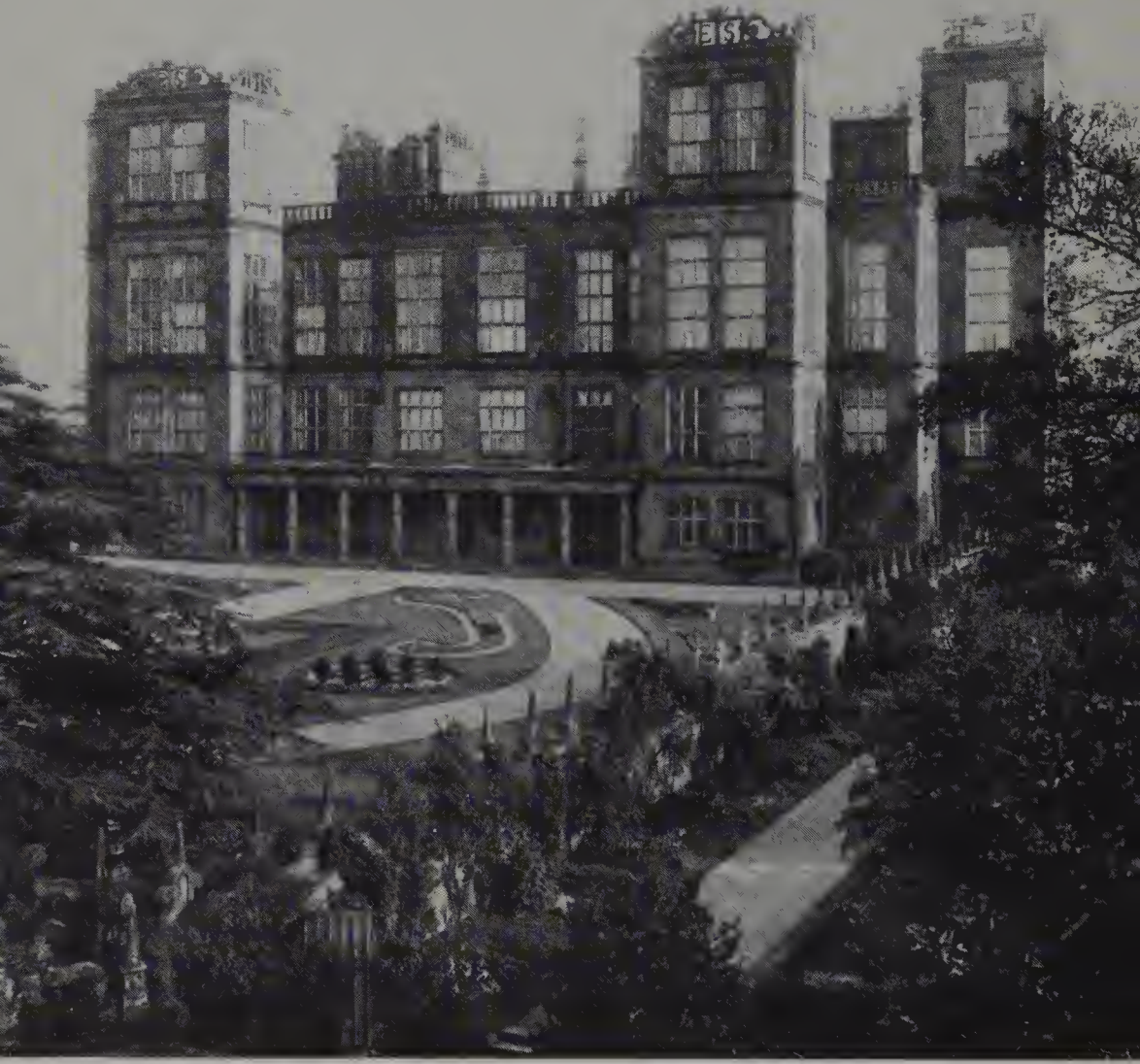
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DA664.R34 H47

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DA664.U6 M4 1965

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A history and description of Chiswick House and gardens / illustrated with drawings by Gordon Cullen. — London : H.M. Stationery Off., 1958. — 31 p. : ill. — (A Ministry of Works guide-book)

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